What Makes a Decision Difficult for State Legislators?

This project examines factors legislators consider when facing difficult issues in committees. If advocates and academics seek to infuse empirical evidence into legislative decision making, they need a clearer understanding of the pressures legislators face. What do they say makes decisions difficult for them? We use open-ended responses from interviews with 404 state legislators to classify the types of issues and the sources of difficulty. There are two commonly accepted sets of reasons why issues might be difficult for legislators: technical complexity and political complexity. Our findings reveal that technical complexity is less prominent than political complexity, but that financial issues are the most vexing decisions legislators face. Moreover, political tensions within the legislative chamber make many decisions difficult. In this investigation we unpack facets of political complexity—an overly broad category. We find that often politics within government makes issues difficult rather than external pressure from interest groups and voters. We explore the ways that committee dynamics may be just as important to decision making as substantive information. Our evidence suggests a different approach for academics and advocates seeking to inform decisions about public policy made by state legislators.

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I. Overview

Legislators cannot be experts about everything. Therefore, they confront a vast array of issues about which they know very little, but still must cast votes. Given their lack of expertise, academics and others often assume that more information would help legislators sort out their positions on difficult decisions (Hird 2005). But what if the reason decisions are difficult arises from something other than technical complexities or an information vacuum? The purpose of this study is to examine issues that make decisions difficult for legislators in committees. Our goal is to contribute to the literature on state legislative decision making and on public policy making more broadly. Specifically, our aim is to examine empirically the sources of difficulty for decisions about issues seriously considered in a legislative committee.

There are two commonly accepted sets of reasons why issues might be difficult for legislators. The first entails technical complexity, ambiguous evidence, and uncertainty about causal connections can make an issue challenging. The second concerns politics. Conflicts between voters’ preferences, party loyalty, and ideology make issues difficult even when empirical evidence is abundant and unambiguous. But we also find that pressure from chamber leaders and tactics of committee chairs make issues difficult. Therefore, we argue here that political difficulty is an overly broad category. It melds the political nature of the issue with a host of other political factors, like political salience, internal chamber or committee dynamics, executive branch politics, partisan conflicts, interest group pressures, and public opinion, among others.

In the following discussion, we develop a framework to unpack the political explanations of why decisions are difficult for state legislators that includes: the nature of the issue, especially whether it concerns money, partisan politics, political maneuvering either within the chamber and committee or between the legislature and executive branch, public pressure, and interest group politics. Categorizing the explanations of what makes decisions difficult is important because it demonstrates that the political pressures that state legislators face are not monolithic. Moreover, it suggests that simply providing legislators with more and better quality information may not address their decision making dilemmas.

Chamber and committee maneuvering are of particular interest because the interpersonal politics of negotiating, horse trading and logrolling necessary to engage in the day-to-day work of legislating can just as easily promote decision making as it can constrain it. We define chamber and committee dynamics as tactics of the committee chairs, the involvement of the leadership, the extent to which the committee members are collaborative or adversarial, and the overall sense of fair play in the committee. Our working hypothesis is that chamber and committee dynamics are more important in explaining why decisions are difficult than has previously been acknowledged in the policy making literature.

The balance of this paper first presents the widely accepted reasons about why decisions are difficult for legislators. Second, it discusses the data and methods of analysis. Third, it outlines the results and preliminary findings. Fourth and finally, it presents a set of conclusions with an eye towards next steps for research on this topic.
II. Explanations for Difficult Decisions for Legislators

The specialized nature of legislative bodies makes it nearly impossible for any one legislator to be expert in all policy fields. Evidence suggests that legislators often take voting cues from like-minded or trusted committee members when confronted with difficult or unfamiliar issues (Matthews and Stimson 1975, Songer 1988, Porter 1974). Cue-taking and the dissemination of information from a committee is often done on a “one on one” basis when legislators are considering the information source (Kingdon 1989).

One particularly troublesome type of problem is the so-called “wicked problem” that goes beyond the scope of one policy area or committee, has no clear solution, and has competing or uncooperative stakeholders (Rittel and Webber 1973). Indeed, these so-called wicked problems imply that policy makers need to draw on a broad range of knowledge to find a solution (Weber and Khademian 2008). The knowledge needed to assess the facts and find a solution to the problem poses challenges for legislators and spawn a host of reasons that making a decision is difficult.

But we suspect that information needs are not the only reason decisions are difficult. Legislatures resemble a team sport more than an individual performance. Therefore, relationships among “team mates” and alliance and coalitions are important parts of legislating. Difficult decisions could arise from the stresses and strains of these relationships. In the following discussion, we probe reasons other than the need for knowledge and information that make decisions difficult. More broadly, the checks and balances at the heart of American government deliberately make decisions politically difficult.

The Nature of the Issue

We explore three different categories of issues in this research: technically complex issues, politically complex issues and issues involving money (e.g., budget cuts, tax increases, funding formulas). These distinctions are not mutually exclusive, however. Some technically complex issues involve money. Moreover, politically complex issues can also be technically complex and/or involve money. In our data, respondents could list as many reasons as they wanted, so both conceptually and empirically we treat the nature of the issue as a multi-faceted construct.

Technical complexity of a policy issue implies the need for members to have specialized training or knowledge to assess the facts of an issue (Gormley 1986). This need for information can make voting on an issue challenging for legislators. Often, technically complex problems are associated with regulatory policy or legislative oversight of regulatory agencies (Ringquist 1995; Gormley 1986; Ringquist, Worsham and Eisner 2003; McCubbins 1985). In the Michigan House and Senate, environmental regulation of storm drain run off, fiscal regulation of property and sales tax, and telecommunications regulation have all been major issues that members have had to deal with in recent years. Moreover, oversight of the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality and the Department of Natural Resources has traditionally been a reoccurring issue for the legislature, as the Flint water crisis demonstrates.
However, technical complexity of an issue does not exist in isolation; instead the political salience of a highly technical issue can complicate matters. In general when the issue salience is high, public engagement increases (Price 1978). While low salience issues tend not to make the challenges of technical complexity insurmountable, high salience issues make managing technical complexity of an issue even more difficult (Gormley 1986; Ringquist, Worsham and Eisner 2003). Yet evidence indicates that state legislators routinely adopt policies to address these high salience issues, as long as they are not technically complex (Nicholson-Crotty 2009). So issue salience of technically complex issues can have a strong effect on the politics of the decision.

In our larger research (Sarbaugh-Thompson and Thompson, forthcoming), we find that conflict is higher on the appropriations committee in Michigan. This might reflect the dire economic state of Michigan’s economy during most of our study period. But cutting budgets is often difficult, especially when funding formulas and mandatory matching requirements constrain budget decisions. Relying on the classic Laswelian definition of politics—who gets what and when—budgetary issues pose difficulty because they present real tangible winners and losers, and they often have high political salience.

Sources of Political Complexity

Partisan Politics

Partisan politics, particularly party preferences have been shown to strongly affect vote cuing in legislatures (Ferber and Pugliese 2000; Hird 2005). Both issue salience and partisan influence on state legislators can result in a difficult decision, especially when the public is paying close attention to an issue in the chamber and the party caucuses have preferred but conflicting policy outcomes. Furthermore, there is room for additional difficulty for a state legislator to make a decision if the party preferences are at odds with public opinion in his or her home district.

Other research shows that the influence of parties is especially strong at the committee level. Legislators will view the committee in differentiated terms when information is being transmitted to a larger body, rather than viewing the committee’s work as reflecting the entire will of the committee (Bianco 1997). Views of committee members are often crucial, as legislators often rely on fellow party members when deciding how to vote rather than relying on the somewhat vague preferences of the constituents they represent (Panning 1983, Kingdon 1989, Songer 1988). Therefore, we explore the role of partisan politics in making a decision difficult.

Political Maneuvering in the Chamber and Committee

It is well established that leadership quality affects legislatures (Francis 1989; Hamm 1982; Jewell and Whicker 1994) and that leaders and committee chairs typically possess extensive powers that facilitate the management of their legislative chambers (Francis 1985, Hamm et al 2006). These powers permit them to play multiple roles: including organizational manager, consensus builder, negotiator, and decision maker (Rosenthal 2009). We concur with other scholars (Hamm et al. 1999, Hamm et al 2006), in their assessment of Michigan’s caucus leaders as especially empowered. For example,
Michigan's top chamber leaders select committee chairs and minority vice chairs, assign all their colleagues to committees, and distribute or withhold party campaign funds. Committee chairs decide whether to take up a bill or not. However, chamber leaders assign bills to committees and can reassign a bill to another committee if a chair fails to move it or if a majority on the committee does not support it. In Michigan, the standard procedure is that a bill does not receive a floor vote unless a majority of the committee supports it and the chamber's leader schedules a floor vote.

The role of committees and the dynamics of politics between legislative chambers is a key element in understanding what makes decisions difficult for legislators. According to DeGregorio (1992), the leadership style of committee chairs matters. Research suggests that the chairs themselves and not the nature of the committee determine which style is utilized (DeGregorio 1992). In our other work, (Sarbaugh-Thompson & Thompson forthcoming), we find that pre-term-limits House committee chairs relied on their formal authority to control the committee agenda to control the work of the committee, but that post-term-limits chairs are seen as exercising less control over the work of their committees. Chamber leaders appear to fill this post-term-limits power vacuum.

Executive Branch Politics

Executive branch politics, meaning the relationship between the governor and executive agencies and the state legislature, can cause difficulty for legislatures in decision making. Leadership style of the governor and the legislative leaders can strongly influence the relationship between the executive and legislative branches (Rosenthal 2004, 2013). Moreover, if governors exercise institutional tools of the executive branch (for example, the line-item veto), they can wield strong influence over the legislative branch (Rosenthal 2004). Depending on their style of leadership, governors have the ability to shape attitudes and set the tone—from friendly to confrontational—of the relationships between the executive and legislative branches of government (Rosenthal 2004, 2013). Governors with a legislative style excel at cutting deals and legislative arm twisting. Governors with an executive style are more aloof, forming few bonds with legislators. In Michigan, governors like John Engler who had previously been a state legislator used knowledge of the legislative process to time bills and executive orders in a way that was expedient but also fostered resentment in the legislature.

As Michigan is a state with legislative term limits, it is not uncommon for term-limited members of the state House and Senate to move around to different positions in state government. Thus, the governor's office can be a valuable employment agency for termed-out legislators (Straayer and Bowser 2004). Under these circumstances, one would expect politically ambitious legislators from the Governor's political party to readily comply with the executive branch, especially after term limits when they are seeking a future job.
Constituent Pressure

A core element of representative democracy is the relationship between elected officials and their constituents. There are two key areas that legislative studies have focused on: how representatives are held accountable for their votes and how legislators influence public opinion in their home districts. Evidence suggests that legislators view constituents as a key information source when developing legislation (Rosenthal & Forth 1978, Mooney 1991). Simultaneously legislators desire to be re-elected motivating them to be aware of the policy preferences of voters (Mayhew 1974) because the electoral consequences of unresponsiveness can be severe.

Holding legislators accountable for their roll call votes assumes that voters are able to discern the policy stances and decisions their elected representatives make, however. Evidence suggests that an individual voter’s cognitive ability to understand an elected official’s decision on a bill or other legislative action is not strong (Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1964; Miller & Stokes 1964). But if voters are offered a distinction between a representative’s policy stances and policy outcomes, their ability to hold officials accountable increases (Canes-Wrone 2002; Jones 2011). The support for high-profile, controversial or difficult issues and how constituents feel about them can impact when and how representatives makes their support public. If the representatives receive clear and unambiguous signals from constituents and other interested groups in their district, then the representatives are more likely to make their stance on the issue known sooner (Box-Steffensmeier, Arnold, & Zorn 1997).

In order to properly represent the policy preferences of their constituents, representatives and constituents must have some level of policy congruence. But this suggests a static relationship where the representative is simply reacting to the preferences of their constituency. A more realistic approach to dealing with constituent pressures is to actively interact with constituents. In contrast to research that argues for a more limited ability on the part of constituents to understand enough to hold elected officials accountable, it is clear that representatives can influence constituent approval through their policy stances (Ansolabehere 2010). Moreover, legislators who listen more are more likely to be influenced by the policy preferences of their district, especially at the state level (Herrick 2012). The exchange of information between representatives and constituents can influence how the representative perceives the policy preferences of their districts and how the representatives choose to interact and relate to their constituency (Wlezien 2004; Fenno 1978; Bianco 1994). These dynamics are complicated and seem likely to make decisions difficult.

Interest Group Politics

The influence of interest groups on legislators is often tied to the role of Political Action Committee (PAC) contributions, information, and ideological considerations or how “friendly” the group is to the committee or legislator. Especially when time is of the essence, evidence suggests that legislators rely on lobbyists as trusted sources of information (Hertel-Fernandez 2014). A key question in the political science literature is whether interest groups can affect the decisions of legislators in committees or on the floor through information dissemination or by contributions made through PACs. However, PAC contributions are not unlimited and do not open the doors to unlimited
influence. Research indicates that the influence of PAC contributions is largely limited unless the interest group has a base of support in the member’s congressional district with his or her constituents (Hojnacki and Kimball 2001). Additionally, PAC influence can vary depending on the context of the issue—whether it is highly visible and ideological or less visible and ideological (Witko 2006).

The role of information is used by lobbyists at both the agenda-setting stage in committee and the voting stage on the floor. Recognition of this influence at both stages allows for interest groups to discern at which stage information will be its more influential (Austen-Smith 1993). This leads to a debate about whether PAC contributions are more effective in buying votes in committee or on the floor. PAC contributions ability to “buy” votes tends to be highest when legislators have not taken a clear policy stance but the influence of those contributions is often offset by the greater influence of direct lobbying (Stratmann 2002; Wright 1990).

In addition to campaign contributions, interest groups are drawn to ideologically similar committees. In this explanation of interest group interactions with legislators, the ideological bias of the groups and committees is of primary importance to an interest group’s influence. Interest groups efforts correlate with the committee members because of the ideological bias of those members and by extension the committee (Kollman 1997). Interests do not give contributions indiscriminately nor does the influence of those contributions reach to the committee level in terms of buying legislator support. Rather, interest group contributions reinforce the policy preferences of “friendly” legislators. These contributions do not buy votes but rather mobilize the legislator’s effort and time on an issue they may otherwise ignore (Hall and Wayman 1990). Therefore, it is an open question in our judgment whether interest group influence makes an issue more or less difficult.

III. Data, Method and Analysis

This research is based on data gathered as part of a larger project examining the effect of term limits on the Michigan legislature. The question we analyze here was asked during face-to-face biannual interviews conducted from 1998 to 2004 with most of the members of the Michigan House of Representatives and quadrennially from 2001 to 2010 with most of Michigan's State Senators. Completions ranged from 89 to 98 of 110 Representatives across the four House panels of the study and between 35 and 27 of 38 Senators across the three Senate panels of the study. We analyze data on these four House sessions and three Senate sessions using descriptive statistics and an exploratory cluster analysis.

During these interviews we asked each respondent to identify a difficult issue seriously considered by a committee on which he or she served. We then asked what made this issue difficult. This is the question we analyze here. This question was open-ended, so the authors developed coding categories based on the literature and an initial attempt to code the data. All three authors coded the open-ended responses independently and then compared their codes. If the coding differed, the authors debated the discrepancies until they reached consensus.
We remind readers that we asked our respondents to select the most difficult issue seriously considered by a specific committee on which they served. Therefore, this is not a random sample of issues. Rather we directed attention toward “wicked problems” (Rittel and Webber 1973) or issues on which legislators lack information (Songer 1988) or other similarly challenging issues. It appears that most committees dealt with at least one such issue during a legislative session because only 2.5% of our respondents said that the committee did not consider any difficult issues. Given that we accepted all reasons our respondents provided, we coded 999 comments made by 404 legislators.

**Reasons for Decision Difficulty**

The frequency of responses about what makes a decision difficult for a state legislator reveals that there are common answers: technical complexity, political complexity, money, interest group involvement, political pressures, and executive branch involvement. We present frequencies for categories of responses in Table 1 to identify common responses. We also present some selected pairs of responses in Table 2 to provide some context for interpreting the meaning and implications of the frequencies.

As we see in Table 1, issues involving money were the most frequently mentioned difficult issues, with 43% of our respondents making specific comments about funding formulas, budget cuts, tax increases or similar conundrums. Next 22% of our respondents said that the technical complexity of an issue accounted for its high level of difficulty, while 25% said specifically that an issue was difficult due to political complexity. This, however, underrepresents the political overtones most legislators’ responses.

>>> Table 1 Here<<<

As Table 1 illustrates several other commonly mentioned reasons for issue difficulty seem to have political overtones. For example, interest group involvement, a response mentioned by 102 or 25% of our respondents, is likely to involve political pressure. The same number of respondents (102) said that political complexity made an issue difficult. Yet only 37 of our respondents mentioned both these reasons that an issue is difficult—a fairly small intersection between the two sets of 102 respondents. Political party conflict made a decision difficult according to 59 legislators. Here again, there is only a small intersection (24 respondents) between the 102 legislators saying the issue is politically complex and the 59 respondents who said that party conflict made the issue difficult. The point is that the general category of political complexity intersections with only a small fraction of the comments that obviously involve politics.

The political science literature, as we noted earlier, indicated that voter pressure makes issues difficult. Yet only fifty-eight legislators attributed the difficulty of a decision to public opinion and other forms of citizen involvement. Two other sources of difficulty seem political in nature--state versus local control and the scope of government. We combined these comments into a category called *jurisdictional dilemmas*, which represented comments made by 80 respondents. Wrestling with the
needs of their home districts with the pressures of making statewide decisions is likely to be politically complex, yet only 17 respondents paired a general comment about political complexity with a comment about jurisdictional dilemmas. Thus, as we argue at the outset of this investigation, lumping all these facets of political complexity together blurs distinctions that may be valuable in understanding legislative decision making. We turn now to unpacking components of the political reasons decisions are difficult. We are especially interested in moving toward underlying relationships among these reasons to try to understand categories of political complexity.

>>>Table 2 Here<<<

Patterns of Reasons for Decision Difficulty

To streamline our analysis, we combined several similar reasons into categorical variables denoting whether a legislator did or did not mention a particular reason. We then tabulated the intersection of nine of these variables. These nine variables represent the following comments: About Money, Politically Complex Issue, Technically Complex Issue, Interest Group Involvement, Any Chamber Politics, Public Involvement, Political Party Disputes, Executive Branch Involvement, and Jurisdictional Dilemmas.

To create the categorical variable for Any Chamber Politics, we combined three codes: Chair Tactics, Committee Dynamics, and Chamber Politics. To create the categorical variable, Executive Branch Involvement, we combined two codes: Governor's Role and State Agency Role. Finally, to create the categorical variable, Jurisdictional Dilemmas, we combined two codes: Regional Conflicts and State versus Local Control. Combining these codes produced nine categorical variables that were mentioned by at least 50 respondents—a cutoff we used to try to focus attention on the major themes in our data.

Money

As Table 2 illustrates, many respondents identified multiple sources of difficulty for a specific committee decision. First, we were uncertain whether political or technical complexity makes decisions about money difficult. Details of a funding formula can be technically complex, but raising taxes or cutting services are often politically risky. Therefore, we looked at other comments that legislators mentioned frequently when they described what made decisions about money difficult. We find that of the 172 respondents who said that some financial aspect of an issue made it difficult, only 25 (15%) also said that technical complexity was a source of difficulty. This means that many more legislators made comments indicating the issues involving money are also difficult for various political reasons.

Second, 35 of the respondents (about 20%) who said the issue was difficult because it involved money also said generally that the issue was politically complex. Therefore, we infer that the politics surrounding budget cuts and tax hikes are often the crux of the monetary difficulty legislators report. Providing support for this interpretation, 31 legislators or 18% of the 172 respondents who mentioned that the
issue was difficult because it involved money also said that interest group pressure made the issue difficult.

Not surprisingly, given that the governor in Michigan possess the power of the line item veto, issue involving money are often complicated by executive branch involvement. Somewhat unexpectedly, jurisdictional dilemmas accompany difficult issues involving money.

Public involvement is the least common pairing with money as a source of difficulty. So, it does not seem to be public outcry about taxes or service cuts that make these financial issues difficult.

**Political Complexity**

Respondents paired political complexity with a wide range of other sources of difficulty. As we just noted, *politically complex* issues frequently involve money. Likewise interest group involvement seems to accompany political complexity. Interest group involvement in politically complex issues stands out, however. More than one-third of respondents who mentioned politically complexity as the source of difficulty also said interest group involvement complicated the issue.

It is worth noting that politically complex issues are also described as technically complex. Nearly 20% of the respondents who mentioned some form of political complexity also mentioned technical complexity.

**Technical Complexity**

*Technical complexity* is paired with fewer other sources of difficulty compared to issues involving money or politically complex issues. But more interestingly, the most frequent pairing with technical complexity is interest group involvement. This may reflect issues that are crucially important for interest group members—such as standards affecting licensing and regulating professional groups—that lack broad political salience. These policies that may not be publicly salient represent areas where interest groups have a high level of technical expertise that may not be present elsewhere among policy actors. But these issues are often of intense interest to the groups affected by them, implying that salience is concentrated among the few.

The least frequent pairing with technical complexity is political party disputes. The low political salience associated with many technically complex issues appears to trigger less partisan conflict.

**Interest Group Involvement**

As we mentioned above, *interest groups* appear to be actively involved in difficult decisions involving all three broad categories of the nature of the problem: money, political complexity, and technical complexity. Additionally comments about difficulties arising from interest group involvement are frequently paired with comments about the difficulties introduced by internal chamber politics and public involvement. About one-quarter (27) of the legislators who mentioned interest group pressure also said that political dynamics within the chamber, either the committee or the caucus made
the issue difficult. This implies that the interest groups exert pressure on legislative decisions through the committee chairs and caucus leaders. A similar number of legislators (25) mentioned both public involvement and interest group involvement. This suggests that interest groups may fuel constituent pressure on some issues.

Some of the issues made difficult by interest group involvement were also seen by respondents as technically complex. Indeed nearly one third of legislators attributing the source of difficulty to interest groups also said the issue was technically complex (34 of 102). One presumes, given the academic literature described earlier, that these legislators needed help from lobbyists to comprehend technical complexities.

**Chamber Politics**

Comments about *chamber politics* and *political party disputes* often appear to go hand-in-hand in explanations of what makes decisions difficult. However, chamber politics and public involvement were very rarely paired as sources of difficulty. This implies that the interpersonal politics among members of the same party, across the aisle, or the politicking that occurs as legislation moves up and down the chamber or committee’s agenda are more prominent sources of difficulty compared to the intersection of public involvement and chamber politics. From this set of pairings, we infer that it is more difficult for state legislators to handle the internal politics of the legislative process than pressures from their voters.

**Executive Branch Involvement**

Sixty-nine of our respondents mentioned that the issue was difficult because the executive branch was involved. During most legislative sessions we include in our analyses, the governor’s party was in the chambers’ minority. Therefore, we discovered that there is a sizeable overlap between the *executive branch involvement* and internal *chamber politics*. As we noted earlier, the largest overlap with executive branch involvement is that the issue concerns money. This is one-third of the respondents mentioning the executive branch, which implies that the governor’s role in budgeting makes some issues difficult for legislators.

**Political Party Disputes**

Logically one would assume that partisanship and intra-party tensions would contribute to the political complexity of an issue. So it is not surprising that nearly 40% of the legislators who said political party disputes made an issue difficult also said that the issue was politically complex. Those who attributed issue difficulty to partisan politics also tended to say that the issue was difficult because it involved money and interest groups were involved. They also often said that internal chamber politics (which includes the tactics of committee chairs and leaders) made the issue difficult.

**Public Involvement**

The academic literature widely discusses the influence of public pressure on state legislators. However, constituent pressures were infrequently mentioned among
our respondents. Only 14% of our respondents said the involvement from the public made an issue difficult. Interestingly, almost half of these legislators also mentioned interest group pressure. This could reflect an interest group tactic of contacting legislators through their constituents—letter writing campaigns and other techniques of the so-called astro-turf approach to citizen participation. The least frequent pairing in Table 2 is difficulty arising from public involvement and political party disputes. Issues that are difficulty for partisan reasons seem distinct from those that are difficulty due to public involvement.

**Jurisdictional Dilemmas**

Regional policy preferences, competitions between cities and suburbs and over state or local control seem fraught with political tensions. And it appears that these tensions play out in the competition for the scarce financial resources of Michigan’s state government. Money is the most frequent source of difficulty paired with jurisdictional dilemmas.

**Cluster Analysis**

To extend our exploration of the underlying structure of the reasons decisions are difficult, we employed cluster analysis of the variables to see which are most closely grouped empirically. We report these results in Table 3. In this cluster analysis, we used Ward’s Method and measured the squared Euclidean distance between the nine categorical variables that we computed for the analysis in Table 2.

>>>Table 3 about here<<<

Generally, Table 3 illustrates that there is an internal structure to the responses about what makes a decision difficult. We began with eight clusters, the maximum possible with nine variables. The first pair of variables that form a cluster are Executive Branch Involvement and Disputes in or across Parties. Reducing the clusters to seven reveals a close association between these two variables and a third variable—Any Chamber Politics. This suggests that there is a category of reasons that decisions are difficult that involves politics within government. This cluster combines internal chamber politics, particularly interpersonal politics, partisan differences, either within the party caucus or across the aisle, and the politics of working with the executive branch.

Moving across Table 3 to the results for 6 clusters reveals a cluster formed by Interest Group Involvement and Public Involvement. As we have noted earlier, it appears plausible that interest groups capitalize on citizen concerns, possibility producing astroturf letters and email campaigns to pressure legislators. We can think of this as an external politics cluster. It is distinct from the internal politics cluster.

When we reach five clusters we find that politically complex issues, interest group involvement and public involvement form the external politics cluster. This seems to fit the common perception of political difficulty arising from interest group
and voter pressure on legislators. The other political cluster, *politics within government*, maintains its separate and distinct structure at the level of five clusters. It does not merge or overlap with the external politics cluster.

Collapsing the clusters further to four clusters and three clusters seems to produce results that did not have sufficient nuance to capture the reasons why decisions were difficult to state legislators. But it is interesting to note that technically complex issues are absorbed into the external politics cluster, which contains interest group involvement. Issues involving money retain their separate distinctiveness even when the data are reduced to 3 clusters. Moreover, jurisdictional issues are absorbed into the politics within government cluster, the cluster with the legislative, executive branch, and political parties. At the level of 3 clusters, there appears to be inside pressures, outside pressures, and money as separate sources of difficulty.

That issues involving money, (meaning a budget or tax increase or an issue related to fiscal governance), forms its own distinct “cluster” suggests that the legislative power of the purse forces legislators to make decisions about how to fund programs, cut budgets, and consider tax increases or cuts. As many legislators pointed out, a legislature can fail to pass various pieces of legislation, but if it fails to pass a budget, state government grinds to a halt. Budgeting appears to produce a unique set of difficult issues that are separate from politics within government and external politics.

The underlying structure of difficult decisions seems to us to be best articulated by grouping the reasons legislators gave into five clusters: politics within government, external politics, technical complexity, financial issues, and jurisdictional issues. Our interpretation of these five clusters is that it supports our working hypothesis--that political complexity blurs distinctions between multiple sources of difficulty. When interpreting the patterns in which the variables are added to the clusters, it is clear that interest group involvement is a cross cutting issues that taps into the difficulty legislators face when confronting their voters about an issues but also when they encounter a technically complex issue that matters most to a narrow group of professionals represented by an organized group and its lobbyists.

**IV. Results and Implications**

Three findings stand out in our minds at this point in the project. First, there are five broad categories of issue complexity: internal politics, external politics, technical complexity, financial issues, and jurisdictional dilemmas. We suspect the legislators’ information needs vary with each of these sources of difficulty. Exploring these needs is the next step in this research project.

Second political complexity is complex. At a minimum it needs to be segmented into two categories: internal and external politics. We think that it is worthy of further effort to sort out the facets of political complexity and to develop strategies that might help legislators manage these problems. Furthermore, unpacking the political complexities has the potential to shed new light on well-trod tactics like logrolling and horsetrading.

It appears from our analysis that two categories of politics play separate roles in making decisions difficult. These are 1) politics within government and 2) external politics. The former includes the personal dynamics within the legislature, tensions
within and between political caucuses in the chambers, and the role of the governor and executive branch agencies. The emphasis our respondents place on the role of committee chairs, caucus leaders and their fellow committee members in making a decision difficult reveals a facet of legislative decision making that has not received as much policy making attention as our data suggest is appropriate.

The external politics cluster includes interest groups and their lobbyists along with citizens or constituents. This preliminary result implies that constituent pressures without interest group collaboration may be less important than previously considered. Moreover, relatively infrequent mention of public pressure (see Table 1) implies that state legislators are primarily focused on what is going on in the State House, rather than Main Street.

Third, it would appear that interest groups and their lobbyists play a role not just in politically complex issues, but also in technically complex issues. They provide technical information to legislators. It appears that this may be so particularly for policy issues that are not broadly salient to the public. If academics, and many do, believe that they can compete with these actors to disseminate more nuanced and impartial information, then they may need to take a page for the interest groups’ playbook – developing key influences within the chambers, cultivating staff, and gaining the trust of legislators.

Fourth, jurisdictional tensions—between cities and suburbs, between regions in a state, and between state control or home rule—are not mentioned often in the literature on legislative decision making. This appears, however, to be a major source of difficulty for our respondents.

Finally, one of the most important topics upon which academics might help educate and inform legislators is on the effect of tax cuts, spending cuts, and other budget measures. Difficulties related to money pose a very prominent reason why decisions are difficult. There is a sizeable literature on the effect of tax cuts with respect to economic stimulus, yet in conversations with legislators they seem unaware of this. Issues related to these financial issues appear to pose the greatest difficulties for legislators, and these are distinct from other sources of difficulty. For example, we think that sources of difficulty related to money are simply found in budgets, tax rates, or funding formulas. Many of our respondents noted that tax collection and distribution structures were complicated and difficult to understand. Moreover, the respondents noted that public understanding of certain money issues—particularly taxes and budget cuts—were not accurate, thus adding to the difficulties.

V. Conclusions and Future Directions

The goal of this investigation is to continue unpacking the sources of political difficulty in making decisions for state legislators. We have three different ways we plan to continue the analysis. First, we plan to capitalize on the implementation of term limits during the time for which we have interviews. Indeed, these data were generated as part of a 13-year study of legislative term limits in Michigan. This means that we can examine whether the experience level of the legislators is associated with different
reasons that an issue seems difficult. We suspect that there is a difference in sources of political difficulties before and after term limits were put into effect.

Second, we are interested in whether the sources of difficulty, particularly political complexity vary by chamber. We have data for two legislative chambers. Therefore, we can examine differences in the Michigan House and the Senate. We also have data about which of 16 sources of information legislators relied upon when trying to decide how to vote on these difficult issues. We plan to compare sources of difficulty with sources of information legislators used to make up their minds to try to understand what strategies might help legislators cope with the difficult decisions they confront.

In conclusion, our investigation has shed light on the complexity of politically complex issues for state legislators in making decisions on issues in committee. The exploratory analysis demonstrates that there are two categories of political complexity for state legislators: challenges within government, meaning politics within the legislature, chamber or committee and working with the executive branch; and challenges outside government that come from interest groups or public pressures. Future investigation is necessary to understand how these two categories of political complexity vary by institutional factors such as term limits and chamber.
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<tr>
<th>Category of Comment</th>
<th>Number of Responses</th>
<th>Percent of Responses</th>
<th>Percent of Respondents</th>
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</thead>
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<td>3.7%</td>
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<td><strong>25.2%</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Technically Complex Issue</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
<td>22.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td><strong>10.2%</strong></td>
<td><strong>25.2%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>172</td>
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<td><strong>42.6%</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Partisan Politics</td>
<td>59</td>
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<td>14.6%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Role of Government</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>All Jurisdictional Dilemmas</strong></td>
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<td><strong>8.0%</strong></td>
<td><strong>19.8%</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>State versus Local Control</td>
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<td>4.6%</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
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<td><strong>Regional Conflict: Includes Cities v. Suburbs</strong></td>
<td>36</td>
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<td>State Agency Role</td>
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<td>8.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-interest: Includes Political Plans</td>
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<td>4.7%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ideology: Taxes and Morality</td>
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<td>6.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Public Opinion</td>
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<td>14.4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Term Limits</td>
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<td>2.7%</td>
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<tr>
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<td>2.2%</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1.0%</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>247.30%</td>
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Bold type indicates combined categories for the more detailed codes appearing in italics immediately below.
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<th>Technically Complex</th>
<th>Interest Groups</th>
<th>Chamber Politics</th>
<th>Executive Branch Pressure</th>
<th>Public Involvement</th>
<th>Political Party Disputes</th>
<th>Jurisdictional Dilemma</th>
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<td>16</td>
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<td>Public Involvement</td>
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<td>Political Party Disputes</td>
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<td>n = 80</td>
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</table>

*Combines three codes: Chair Tactics, Committee Dynamics, and Chamber Politics. Duplicates after combining the codes were eliminated.

**Combines two codes: Governor’s Role and State Agency Role. Duplicates after combining the codes were eliminated.
### Table 3

**Cluster Membership**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>8 Clusters</th>
<th>7 Clusters</th>
<th>6 Clusters</th>
<th>5 Clusters</th>
<th>4 Clusters</th>
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<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>Interest Group Involvement</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>Public Involvement</td>
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<td>3</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any Chamber Politics</td>
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<td>6</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disputes in or across Parties</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>Executive Branch Involvement</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Combines three codes: Chair Tactics, Committee Dynamics, and Chamber Politics. Duplicates after combining the codes were eliminated.

**Combines two codes: Governor’s Role and State Agency Role. Duplicates after combining the codes were eliminated.
References


Appendix A: Codebook

What was the most difficult issue the Committee seriously considered this term?

1. Nature of issues
   1.1. Politically complex
   1.2. Technical complex
   1.3. Culture war
   1.4. Constitutional dilemmas

2. Interest group involvement
   2.1. Winners and losers
   2.2. Who gets what
   2.3. Pimping for industry

3. Taxes/budget/finance
   3.1. Need federal funds
   3.2. Funding formula
   3.3. Tax increase
   3.4. Budget cut
   3.5. Tax relief winners and losers

4. Partisan
   4.1. Across party differences
   4.2. Within caucus differences

5. Role of government
   5.1. What to pay for?
   5.2. Scope of government
   5.3. Home rule
   5.4. Local prerogatives

6. Personality Politics
   6.1. Chair—dynamics
   6.2. Chair—tactics positive
   6.3. Chair—tactics negative
   6.4. Committee dynamics
   6.5. Pressure from leaders

6.6. Peer pressure
6.7. Governor
6.8. Agency head
6.9. Dishonest

7. Personal Considerations
   7.1. Political ambition
   7.2. Business/financial interests
   7.3. Moral philosophy
   7.4. Personal experiences
   7.5. Actors involved are protecting their own interests

8. Constituents
   8.1. Public opinion
   8.2. Public pressure
   8.3. Delegate/trustee issues

9. Term limits/Term limit effects
   9.1. Institutional knowledge
   9.2. Mastery of process
   9.3. Experience/lack thereof

10. Geographic differences
    10.1. Local control
    10.2. Regional policy preferences

11. Spillover
    11.1. Too many competing plans
    11.2. Rammed through without considering the effects
    11.3. Need help from other chamber
    11.4. Need help from executive branch

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1 Michigan’s legislative chambers each have two caucus campaign accounts that are Political Action Committees (PACs). These are controlled by top caucus leaders of each political party in each chamber.